

**Sustaining 21st Century Community Learning Centers:
What Works and How Policymakers Can Help**
Summary of A Forthcoming Brief from The Finance Project

For nearly a decade, schools and communities across the country have implemented comprehensive out-of-school time programming with grants from the U.S. Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Centers (21CCLC) program. The only federal funding source dedicated to out-of-school time programs, 21CCLC has invested in tutoring, enrichment and other services for low-income children and their families. 21CCLC grants, however, were largely construed as seed grants for new programs and were not intended to provide programs with long-term funding. As grants expire, many schools and community partners are now struggling to ensure the long-term sustainability of their out-of-school time programs.

Through interviews with former and current 21CCLC grantees and state 21CCLC administrators, The Finance Project (TFP) has learned about the challenges to sustainability and the keys to success. It became clear, through these conversations, that factors both at the program level and in the administration of grants can help and hinder success with sustainability. (While federal policies affect sustainability, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) transferred administration of the grants to states in 2002, leaving state education agencies (SEAs) to make many decisions about program implementation.)

This summary briefly lays out the findings of The Finance Project's research. A final report outlining these findings will be published this summer.

Research Methods

Between July 2005 and March 2006, TFP held small focus groups and interviews with 22 current and former 21CCLC grantees that have had some success with sustainability. These programs were either former federal grantees who no longer receive 21CCLC funds or former federal grantees who accessed significantly reduced 21CCLC funding when program administration was transferred to states. All continue to offer some degree of out-of-school time programming. Programs take place in rural and urban communities nationwide and have varying degrees of local support. TFP made attempts to contact programs that have not sustained 21CCLC programming, but had little success as key staff were often no longer employed at the site.

The Finance Project additionally held small focus groups with state 21CCLC administrators from nine states, who gave their input on how state policy choices might impact program sustainability. Additional state-by-state data on 21CCLC policy was provided by Learning Points Associates and by the U.S. Department of Education.

Has Programming Been Sustained?

No known national or state data exists to accurately determine how many previously funded 21CCLC programs have sustained programming thus far. Some state administrators reported to TFP that many of the initial federally-funded program sites have closed entirely. That said, all of the participants in our focus groups continue to offer out-of-school time programming with more limited funds. Some participants reported, however, that they are not able to sustain activities of the same scope or the same quality that was previously funded.

Finally, some of the programs interviewed by TFP reported that they have been able to serve a similar number of students with more limited funds, but many had to make difficult decisions, some of which may impact program quality. For example:

- ⇒ Programs no longer conduct a rigorous evaluation or hire a full-time administrator;
- ⇒ Communities used 21CCLC funds to make investments in capacity and technology that outlived the grant cycle.
- ⇒ Programming for parents and community members is significantly reduced or eliminated, but communities continue to provide afterschool programming for children.
- ⇒ Summer programming is reduced or eliminated, but programs maintain programs during the school year.
- ⇒ Programs rely more heavily on volunteers or paraprofessionals rather than more highly qualified and expensive program staff, such as certified teachers.

Keys to Program Sustainability

Staff from The Finance Project asked programs, who have sustained some, if not all of their out-of-school time programming, to share the key factors that have helped them to be successful. Grantees identified the following factors as critical to sustainability:

- **Collaborative partnerships:** Grantees reported overwhelmingly that partnerships are an essential part of long-term sustainability and particularly noted the importance of partners who truly collaborate in program development, rather than simply serve as a program vendor.
- **Varied funding sources:** Many programs identified having a diversity of funding sources in place before a 21CCLC grant expired as a key element in sustaining programming. Some of the funding sources that were key to sustaining these programs include funds from the school district budget, Title I, federal child care subsidies, Americorps, United Way, and funds from local foundations.
- **High quality programs and proven results:** Grantees noted that their ability to prove and document the quality of their programs is an asset when seeking support beyond a 21CCLC grant.
- **Support from school administration:** Several grantees interviewed cited the importance of a supportive school administration and central office with regard to sustainability. Many providers pointed to supportive school administrators who are able to provide a program with funds from the district budget and/or serve a champion for the program as it seeks other funds.
- **Key champions:** In addition to school administration, grantees explained that other leaders in their community that have served as champions for their program, helping to raise public awareness and leverage new sources of funding. Some of the champions cited include local politicians and local business leaders.
- **Community engagement:** Grantees pointed out the importance of meaningful community engagement, stressing that local support was essential to program

sustainability. Focus group participants described events and activities that help to make the program more visible in the community.

- **Capacity prior to 21CCLC grant:** Some grantees interviewed believed that, since they already had an out-of-school time program in place before they received a grant, they were better equipped to plan for sustainability. Others, however, did not find that existing capacity was a major asset for sustainability.

State/Federal Policy and Sustainability

In discussions with grantees, many explained that the way in which grants are administered can affect their ability to successfully sustain programming. Through discussions with state 21CCLC administrators and program leaders, TFP has identified six key policy areas that have the potential to impact program sustainability. Decision-making in these policy areas is often made by state policymakers, but is also influenced by current federal laws.

- **Length of Grant Periods:** All of the initial federal grants were three years in length, but states now have the option to award grants from 3-5 years in length. Many of the programs that participated in our focus groups indicated that three year grants did not provide enough time for communities to develop and manage a new program and plan for long-term sustainability. Programs reported that a grant period of five years or more would allow them a more realistic time frame to get programming underway, as well as to learn how to sustain themselves (develop internal capacity, cultivate funding sources, etc.) Some programs even noted that they would prefer to stretch the same amount of funding over a longer time frame. 21CCLC administrators held varying opinions on the length of grant periods; some felt that shorter grant periods were sufficient, while others would prefer grant periods that exceed the federal limit of five years.
- **Declining Grant Awards:** Given the time-limited nature of 21CCLC grants, however, many states decrease the size of grants after the second or third year of funding, allowing programs to gradually leverage additional funds. Since this strategy was only recently implemented, state administrators and programs could not yet describe its effectiveness. Administrators and many grantees, however, viewed declining grant awards as a promising strategy to promote sustainability.
- **Size of Grants:** 21CCLC grants, especially the initial federal awards, have been generally quite large and due to their sheer size, program leaders report that these grants are difficult to fully replace with other funds. While the federal 21CCLC program encourages states to award large grants to help program implement quality programming with measurable results, many programs (particularly in rural areas with limited local resources) have found it difficult to maintain the scope and scale of the program when funds expired. Achieving a grant size that is appropriate and that can support a program getting off the ground, but not hinder its long-term sustainability is important. State 21CCLC administrators report that, in making decisions about grant size for various sites, they have done research to ensure that grants are of an appropriate size to support a reasonable per child and per hour rate.

- Refunding Existing Grantees:** Federal and state agencies have generally viewed the 21CCLC program as a seed grant program, where grantees would use funds to establish a program and then rely on other funding to sustain the program. While some of the programs interviewed by The Finance Project received a federal 21CCLC grant and then received another, typically smaller state 21CCLC grant, programs typically do not expect to continue to receive 21CCLC funding indefinitely. States have varying policies regarding the refunding of existing 21CCLC grantees, but some state administrators interviewed expressed interest in continuing to offer new grants, while also offering some smaller continuation grants for programs who continue to perform well, stating that it may be unreasonable to expect some programs to fully replace 21CCLC dollars. Some suggested that potentially allowing grants of a smaller size (less than the \$50,000 federal minimum) might be useful for these continuation grants. However, administrators recognize the tension between supporting program sustainability and encouraging access to programs.
- Training/Technical Assistance on Sustainability:** Several state administrators have offered trainings and workshops on sustainability, including how to write grants, diversity resources and build partnerships. According to PPICS data, 83% of states offer some kind of training/TA on promoting program sustainability in 2003. Grantees reported varying degrees of satisfaction with the training or technical assistance that they had received from their state regarding sustainability. Some felt that trainings provided them with helpful ideas, while others suggested that they needed more exposure to best practices or a “model” for long-term sustainability.
- Allowing/Encouraging Program Fees:** The U.S. Department of Education allows 21CCLC grantees to charge program fees, so long as no families are turned away because they cannot afford the program. While many states leave this decision entirely to the program’s discretion, others either encourage, discourage or ban program fees. Many grantees report that charging program fees is critical to support program activities beyond a 21CCLC grant. Others report that that nominal fees help families to feel invested in the program and increase participation and program support. Finally, others believe that there is value to charging fees when the program is first implemented because families will be more resistant to paying fees if they are implemented later on.

The final report on sustaining 21st Century Community Learning Centers will be available later this summer on: <http://www.financeproject.org>.

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